

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Queasy rider

His abject failure to get off the starting grid at Donington race track prompts David Robinson to do something he hasn't done for years: build his own PC

I accelerated hard out of the double apex at Coppice and shot under the Dunlop bridge. I then sat up and broke hard for a quick flick left and right through the Foggy esses and off again through the Melbourne loop to finish another lap.

The last time I did this was on a Honda CBR600RR belonging to former GP rider Ron Haslam's race school at Donington Park. That was last year. This time, though, I'm in absolutely no danger of falling off. Not through any dramatic increase in my meagre riding skills; I'm standing in the middle of the NEC at the annual motorcycle show playing a game simulation. And damned good it is, too: very realistic, in fact realistic enough to get me to part with £20 for the special, never-to-be-repeated show offer. It had better be worth it.

The version I was playing was for the Sony PlayStation. I don't actually own a PlayStation, but the man on the stand and the blurb on the back of the PC version suggest it will be OK on my Sony Vaio notebook. It says it requires an 800MHz processor, and as the Vaio has a 2.8GHz processor I reckon it should be a breeze.

WITHOUT A PADDLE

I realise that there's no way you can work a simulation such as this using either the keyboard or the mouse to control it. Not being a games player, I don't have anything suitable to hand, so the following Friday lunchtime I braved the traffic for a trip to PC World to see what was on offer.

It took me ages to find the right shelf. Frankly, in comparison to the Xbox and PS2 stuff, the PC offerings are a bit on the thin side and look pathetic. There was a pile of basic games paddles priced at £4.95 – the price was right, but that was about all as they didn't look as if they would be capable of much. Next to that was a sign with a picture that appeared to be what I wanted for £11.95, but they were out of stock. Next was a single box containing a Saitek P2600 Rumble thing covered in buttons, costing £25. Then there was a pile of Logitech things that



looked like the Saitek, but in a fancier box. These were £45! I did the logical thing and grabbed the Saitek before somebody else got in before me and left me with the expensive option.

At home, with bated breath I installed the Saitek drivers on the Vaio. It comes with a little test utility and everything seemed to be working fine, including the rumble feature, which had the device leaping around in a very satisfying kind of way. So far, so good. I installed Milestone's Super Bikes: Riding Challenge without any problems.

When I ran it, I got sound and an introductory video that showed the game credits. That went on. And on. And on. Gordon Bennett, were they ever going to get to the end? If there's a 'skip the credits' control, I couldn't find it. Then there were some videos of bikes going 'brrrm, brrrm'. That went on and on and on as well.

THE JOY OF STICKS

At long bloody last I got to the game bit. I took the sensible option and selected the novice settings, then found the menu bit where you configure the game for your joystick. All I had to do was remember what each axis on each controller and the 12 buttons all do.

Hell's teeth – a real bike is easier than this.

I finally got on the grid for Donington looking down the straight to where the right-hander Redgate awaited. Mostly I could see a load of arses in multi-coloured leathers in front of me, so the game is pretty realistic. The start lights all went red and then, one by one, went out. Go! I pressed the throttle control. There was a loud roar of engines and...

Well, nothing. The sound card blurted out intermittent racing-type noises, but the display was frozen. None of my frantic button pushing seemed to have any effect. After about a minute and a half there was another bout of loud engine noises that sounded like the whole field had just passed me by, but the display was still stuck. Now by Valentino Rossi's standards I know I'm slow, but not that slow. I hadn't moved an inch.

The only way I could get out of this was the power-off switch, which was a bummer because Windows XP takes an age to reboot. I didn't really expect a better result the second time around, but still, I tried again. More endless credits. Another static lap. Another stab at the power switch. I think the blurb about minimum requirements speaks with forked tongue.

GOLDEN OLDIES

I found myself doing something I haven't done for years – and before you ask, it didn't involve being upstairs with Roz (see *Under Development*, *Shopper* February 2007). The Vaio is now almost three years old and is fine for normal business jobs such as using Word, Excel and email. My home PC is even older: an 800MHz Pentium III running Windows 98. Again, it's been fine for what I've needed up to now, which is mainly running Cakewalk Pro Audio 9 for music recording and editing and Microsoft Flight Simulator, which used to be considered the quintessential test of a butch PC. Although it just meets Milestone's minimum specifications, I'm not daft enough to try it on that. Mrs R also bought me a copy of Cakewalk Sonar for Christmas to replace the ageing Pro Audio 9, and that will never run on the old Pentium box.

So, it's time to splash out on a new PC. I may be ostracised in Yorkshire for this, but hang the expense. The dilemma is what to buy. If I want the new computer to be in service as long as the last one at home, the specs need to be good. What I have in mind is a dual-core processor, at least 1GB of RAM, a 350GB hard disk, two-layer DVD writer and whizz-bang video.

However, when I look at what the resellers want for such a thing, the price is a bit steep: around £700. Plus delivery. Plus VAT. I don't want a screen; I've got a nice 19in LCD already. I don't want an operating system because we pay for a Microsoft Direct Access subscription that gets us licensed copies of all sorts except development languages, so I can use one of those. So, the something I haven't done for years is buy the bits and build it myself. Is this really a good idea? I don't know. I'll tell you about the result next month if I'm not running in circles and pulling out my hair in clumps. **CS**

David Robinson

Software and systems developer

davidr@computershopper.co.uk

